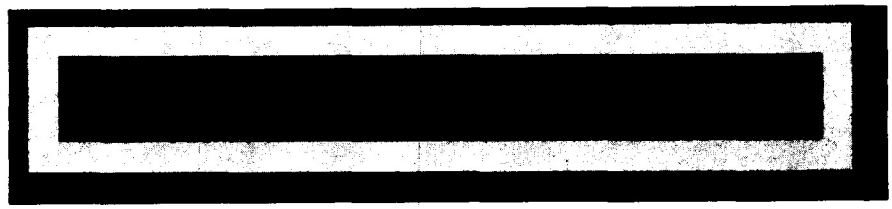

THOMAS SZASZ

The devil's fool

NOT SURPRISINGLY, MOST victims of involuntary mental hospitalization are poor and powerless. However, prominent persons also manage to get committed. Why? Because "madness" often relieves people of guilt and responsibility, thus "freeing" them of the burden of having to conduct themselves competently, day in and day out.

Shadowland, by William Arnold (McGraw-Hill, 260 pp., $9.95), is the story of Frances Farmer's life, especially those parts of it that concern her encounters with psychiatry. Seemingly sharing the public's ignorance of how popular an American pastime it is to commit one's loved ones, Arnold writes as if Frances Farmer's case were unusual. Compassionate toward his subject, he even suggests that Farmer was not mad but the victim of a political conspiracy, an interpretation that prompted the *Kirkus Reviews* to dismiss the book with this revealing sentence: "All the outrage against injured innocence can't cover the stench of paranoia." Nevertheless, Arnold succeeds in conveying the choreography of the *danse macabre* we call "schizophrenia-and-its-treatment" far better than do most writers on this subject, whether professionals or laymen.

Before Frances Farmer was born, her father, a passive individual, separated from his wife Lillian. A woman more than six feet tall, with strong views on everything, Lillian had campaigned for good nutrition and against Communism. In 1931, in her junior year in high school, Frances, a bright girl, wrote an essay called "God Dies," which her teacher entered in a national competition. "I wondered a little," wrote Frances, pondering the "injustices" of the world, "why God was such a useless thing. It seemed a waste of time to have Him." The essay won first prize and created a furor.

Farmer enrolled as a drama major at the University of Washington in 1935. She promptly won another contest, this one sponsored by Seattle's Communist newspaper. The prize was a VIP trip to the Soviet Union. On her return she declared: "My sympathy and support are all for Russia."

Returning to Seattle a year after leaving the university, she went out of her way to insult the dignitaries who feted her. "When one right-wing Congressman introduced himself at the reception [for her]," Arnold writes, "she called him a 'hypocrite' and calmly walked away."

FRANCES FARMER THUS emerged from adolescence possessing a dangerous mixture of personal qualities: she was beautiful and brainy, but she was also arrogant and conceited. She exemplified the sort of person about whom it is said that she loves mankind and hates people. As a result, all her human relationships soured, quickly; everyone and everything disappointed her.

Because her assets as an actress were more readily apparent than her liabilities as a person, her career was a series of quick successes that led nowhere. Within a year of her Soviet tour she was a Hollywood star.

After two years in Hollywood, she was fed up. She could "see nothing but shallowness and deceit." Again she began to speak out for left-wing causes. In 1937, she left for Broadway. Another quick success. Then an affair with a famous director, which, like her earlier marriage, soon broke up. Embracing "worthy" left-wing causes but rejecting individuals as unworthy, Farmer became increasingly isolated and lonely. She took to amphetamines and alcohol.

Frances Farmer's career was now visibly disintegrating. But her arrogance and nastiness knew no bounds. In an argument, she knocked a studio hairdresser down, dislocating her jaw. The woman filed charges. When the police discovered that Farmer had not paid an earlier fine for a drunken driving arrest, they went to her hotel. She tried, clumsily, to flee. Taken to the Santa Monica jail, she gave her occupation, in Arnold's words, "as such an unorthodox one (presumably 'cocksucker') that it caused the police booking officer to jump when he read it." Arraigned in court, this is how she dealt with the judge:

Judge: Have you driven a car since you were placed on probation?
Farmer: No, I haven't, but only because I couldn't get my hands on one.
Judge: Have you reported to your probation officer as directed?
Farmer: No, I never saw him. Why didn't he show up?
Judge (incredulously): Did you expect him to look you up?
Farmer: I expected him to be around so I could get a look at his face.

Farce? Of course! Folly? That depends on how severely those in power want to punish the person who so deliberately dishonors them. Amid giggling spectators, the judge sentenced Frances Farmer to serve the 180 days of her previously suspended sentence. She then asked to make a phone call. When the matron refused to give permission for it, she knocked her down, flooring another officer in the process. To the booking sergeant she gave her occupation as "vagrant vagabond."

Why did such a hugely successful actress—she made more than a million dollars, after taxes, in the six years prior to her arrest (and first psychiatric commitment)—say that she was a "vagrant vagabond"? Among other reasons, because she had given away all of her money. Every penny of it. To Communist causes, to Spanish Civil War groups, to migrant workers, to members of her own family. As a result, when the long-smoldering hostilities between her and her antagonists—familial, judicial, psychiatric—erupted into open warfare, she was destitute, defenseless. "The madman," as Gilbert Chesterton astutely observed, "is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason." Frances Farmer had indeed lost, or thrown away, everything except her reason. Such a person is ready, in an imagery Chesterton would have heartily approved of, to make a pact with the Devil. Which Frances Farmer proceeded to do.

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I will not give away the rest of the story. Suffice it to say that Frances Farmer spends many years in a mental hospital, is drugged, electroshocked, perhaps even lobotomized (no one seems to know for sure). Her degradation and humiliation at the hands of psychiatrists are well described and fully documented. Finally, she is released, a shell—indeed, a mockery—of her former self.

WHAT SHALL WE MAKE of *Shadowland* as a critique of psychiatry? Aside from several minor "technical" errors (such as calling hydrotherapy "a primitive form of shock treatment"), the book is a moving indictment of mad-doctoring. So what? There have been many such indictments over the past two hundred years—to no avail. That is to be expected. Vested interest, prejudice, and fashion are more powerful molders of opinion than is evidence. But that does not diminish the need to document such depravities.

The main value of Arnold's book lies in letting us see Frances Farmer and the people most responsible for her psychiatric damnation, especially her mother, as human beings. Horrible human beings, but human beings nonetheless. Especially in this respect Arnold's book is vastly superior to the countless contemporary accounts of the commitments of Very Important Persons. Arnold confronts what others who write about psychiatric incarceration avoid. He reveals what others conceal. Perhaps because he is rather naive about both psychiatry and psychiatric criticism, and perhaps because he is an honest man who writes well, his book offers a much better lesson in the anatomy of madness and mad-doctoring than other similar stories.

What, finally, should we think of Frances Farmer? In a letter to William Dean Howells, Mark Twain once called himself "God's fool." That he was: loving, compassionate, considerate—and, above all, humorous. If the Devil has fools, too, Frances Farmer was surely one of them: unloving, arrogant, inconsiderate—and above all, humorless. But this is not the way we are supposed to think about "mental illness" and "mental treatment." Befogged by the vapors of a fake science, our vision of the tragicomedy that is modern psychiatry is obscured. Arnold's book is a shaft of light stabbing through the darkness. ❑